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ABSTRACT

A summary of a report on the value of the General Educational Development (GED) Tests prepared in 1994 for Congressional hearings on the reauthorization of vocational and adult education legislation includes the following highlights: (1) each year more than 750,000 adults (average age 26) take the GED tests and about 450,000 adults obtain high school credentials based on the tests; (2) the value of the GED credential is determined by the fact that it validly certifies the attainment of high school level knowledge and skills; (3) GED graduates, on average, perform as well as high school graduates in community colleges; (4) more than 40 percent of GED graduates attend college after passing the tests; (5) about 75 percent of colleges and universities accept a high school equivalency credential based on the GED tests; (6) passing the GED tests provides graduates with opportunities for better jobs; and (7) federal support for the GED program should continue, allowing the program to be strengthened and professionalized, targeted to those whose skill levels are suited to this level of study, and made more relevant to adults. (Contains 31 references.) (KC)

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WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THE GED? A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

American Council on Education
Center for Adult Learning
and Educational Credentials

GED Testing Service

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What is the value of the GED? A Summary of Research

by

Janet Baldwin

November 1995

This article is adapted from a report prepared November 1994 for Hearings on the Reauthorization of Vocational and Adult Education Legislation.

Each year, more than 750,000 adults take the GED Tests, and about 450,000 adults obtain high school credentials based on the tests. The American Council on Education has operated the GED Testing Service since just after World War II, when the military requested that the American Council on Education take over the administration of the program. This report summarizes key information about the value of the General Educational Development (GED) credential, the status of research evidence about economic and postsecondary outcomes of GED graduates, and the role of the GED diploma in adult secondary education programs.

Most research studies recognize that the *value* of the GED credential is determined by the fact that it validly certifies the attainment of high school level knowledge and skills and, thus, qualifies individuals for further education, training, and employment opportunities. In recent years, additional studies have gone on to explore the value of the GED credential in terms of its impact on the subsequent education and employment activities of recipients. There is considerable evidence that the GED credential increases access to college, other postsecondary education and training programs, and better jobs.

Background

People who take the GED Tests average 26 years of age; more than half are women, and disadvantaged minorities make up a disproportionate share of candidates. Given the changing demographics of our society—and our rapidly changing economy—programs which expand opportunities for the educational and economic advancement of adults play a valuable role. The GED does exactly this. It is based on the belief that everyone deserves a second chance to qualify for further

education, training, and better jobs. This principle is fundamental to a democratic society. Adults who left school early deserve a variety of opportunities not only to *learn* the skills and knowledge of responsible citizenship but to *document* those skills and knowledge. The GED Tests provide that documentation at the high school level.

Toward this end, the GED Testing Service and the Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials of the American Council on Education support lifelong learning and the recognition of alternative programs for high school completion. The historic purpose of the Center's programs has been to provide systematic and reliable ways to document and accredit adults for the learning they have acquired regardless of how they acquired it.

People who take the GED Tests are a highly diverse adult population who comprise three broad groups. In one group are adults who attained high school-level academic skills before they left school, even though they dropped out before receiving their high school diplomas. In another group are adults who continued to develop their high school-level academic skills outside of the formal or traditional school environment, either by studying on their own or learning through life experience on the job, in the home, or in the community. For both of these groups of GED test takers, passing the GED Tests provides a way to document educational skills and earn the high school credentials they need to address other goals such as enrolling in college, qualifying for job training or applying for better jobs. Receiving the GED validates their attainment of high school-level knowledge and skills and may give them the confidence they need to pursue more ambitious academic and career goals.

The third category of GED test-takers are adult learners who still need to develop the general educational skills and knowledge associated with high school completion. Beyond the need to develop their academic skills, these adults may also need training and opportunities to learn the personal and work-related skills associated with successful participation in the labor force. For these test-takers, attaining a GED credential can vary from a goal well within their grasp to one that remains a far-off dream. The factors that may influence their chances of passing the GED include the level of their developed abilities, the quality and availability of education resources, the duration and sequence of their learning opportunities, the capability of their teachers, the relevance of curriculum and instruction to their learning needs, and their level of comfort with standardized tests.

For all adults who take the GED Tests, attaining the GED credential can open the door for a number of opportunities—such as enrollment in college or job training programs—not otherwise available to those who leave high school early. Earning the GED credential can encourage people to greater aspirations for further education and better employment. Additionally, such aspirations can have positive effects on the children of GED graduates, as was found in a 1991 study in Iowa.[1]

The Challenge

As changes occur in the structure of the workforce and skill requirements of jobs over the coming decades, one thing appears certain: to qualify for higher-paying jobs, workers need the kind of skills and knowledge typically acquired through postsecondary education and training. For more than fifty years, the GED Tests have provided this access to postsecondary education and training opportunities for adults. Today, more than one in twenty college students holds a GED diploma. The nearly 12 million persons who have earned the credential testifies to the GED's value to a significant segment of the American population. Used judiciously and in partnership with sound adult secondary education programs, the GED Tests will continue to provide even greater access to educational and employment opportunities.

Most research to date indicates that: 1) The GED credential continues to validate the high school-level academic skills and knowledge of adults who did not complete high school; 2) GED graduates succeed in postsecondary institutions on a par with traditional high school completers; and 3) by obtaining a GED credential, former dropouts significantly increase their chances for higher earnings, better jobs, and full-time employment.[2] The GED-related research can be summarized in three areas of impact: academic skills, postsecondary experiences, and social and economic outcomes of GED graduates.

The Research

I. Academic Skills

The overall performance of GED test-takers is directly comparable to that of graduating high school seniors. All 50 states and ten Canadian provinces award a high school equivalency credential based on successful completion of the GED Tests.

- Agencies such as the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Office of Personnel Management, the Office of Technology Assessment, and departments of

education in all fifty states recognize the GED credential as a high school diploma when measuring educational levels and gains.[3]

- To earn a GED credential, GED examinees must surpass the test performance of about 30 percent of graduating high school seniors.[4]

The literacy skills of adults, as measured by the recent National Adult Literacy Survey[5] (NALS), range from very low proficiency (Level 1) to very high proficiency (Level 5). On this literacy continuum, a bipartisan panel proposing educational goals for the nation recommended the moderate level (Level 3) and above on the NALS prose literacy scale as the performance target for measuring the national goal on adult literacy and lifelong learning.[6] Among the findings of the NALS study:

- The average literacy skills of adults who ended their formal education with a GED or traditional high school diploma were the same. These findings held equally true for African Americans, Hispanics, and whites.[7]

- People who *pass* the GED Tests demonstrate literacy skills, on average, within the moderate (Level 3) range, reflecting a level of literacy widely viewed as necessary for social and economic advancement and for exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Those who take the tests but *don't pass* display lower literacy skills (Level 2), on average.[8]

- Persons who demonstrate higher levels of literacy are more likely to pursue the GED and earn a high school credential than those with lower levels of literacy.[9]

- GED attainment appears to be a proxy for higher levels of literacy proficiency.[10]

II. Postsecondary Education Experiences

While national data on postsecondary outcomes of GED graduates are limited, evidence from studies comparing GED and traditional students in college[11] and from a national database on college students[12] suggests that GED graduates on average, perform as well as high school graduates in community colleges.

- GED graduates and high school diploma recipients (HSD) enrolled in 2-year public institutions earned about the same average number of credit hours in a semester (GED, 7.2 hours; HSD, 6.9 hours) and achieved nearly the same GPA (GED, 2.6; HSD, 2.7).[13]

How many GED graduates attend college? A recent study found that three in ten GED examinees planned to enroll in two-year colleges within the following year.[14]

- More than two in five GED graduates (43 percent) attended 4-year or 2-year colleges after receiving a diploma. Nearly two in three high school graduates (63 percent) did so.[15]

- One in three GED graduates (33 percent) and two in five traditional high school graduates (40 percent) who attended 2-year public institutions planned to earn a Bachelor's Degree.[16]

- Roughly three-fourths (74 percent) of all colleges and universities accept a high school equivalence credential based on the GED Tests. This represents 91 percent of institutions that do not require a traditional high school diploma but that do require some certification.[17]

Studies also find that the influence of the GED on wages comes primarily through its effect on certification for postsecondary training and that the rates of economic return of postsecondary activity for high school graduation and GED certification are the same.[18] A need exists for further national longitudinal studies which would examine the postsecondary goals, experiences, and success of traditional high school graduates as well as those with equivalent credentials.

III. Social and Economic Outcomes

It is useful for a high school dropout to prepare for and take the GED examination.[19] Research supports the conclusion that earning the GED provides high school dropouts with opportunities for better jobs.

- Recent studies show clear distinctions between the economic profiles of adults at lower levels of literacy (Levels 1 and 2) and those at moderate levels and above (Levels 3, 4, and 5), as measured by the National Adult Literac

Survey (NALS) scales.[20] Most GED graduates demonstrate these moderate to high levels of literacy.

- GED graduates earn an average of $2,040 more per year than high school dropouts.[21]

- GED graduates are significantly more likely than dropouts to be in the labor force, to be employed full-time, and to be employed for 40 or more weeks during the year.[22] They are also more likely to receive additional training after earning their credential.[23]

- A national survey of employers found that between 96 and 98 percent treated traditional high school graduates and holders of GED credentials the same in terms of starting salary, employment level, and opportunities for advancement.[24]

- There is a strong relationship between literacy skills and economic status and this relationship is stronger for older adults than for younger adults.[25]

- Although the earnings of young male GED graduates were lower than young male high school graduates, it is possible that the earnings of GED graduates and high school graduates will look more similar at older ages.[26]

- The wages of GED graduates grew at a faster rate after earning the credential than they did before and this held true for both male and female dropouts.[27]

Conclusions and Recommendations

Federal support for educational programs that prepare adults to qualify for the GED credential is vitally important and should continue. The GED's great value has been its national acceptance as a tool for certifying the attainment of strong academic and higher-order thinking skills at the high school level. With this valuable tool, those with stronger skills can move on immediately to more advanced programs. Programs leading to GED credentials should be strengthened and professionalized, targeted appropriately to those whose skill levels are suited to this level of study, and made more relevant to adults.

The GED Testing Service is presently exploring what changes, if any, should be made to the GED Tests to reflect what society will need and expect from a secondary education credential in the next century. Research and planning for the GED 2000 project already has begun.

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